

Medical Placement in Santo, Vanuatu: A Transformative Experience

My six-week medical placement at Medical Santo, a non-profit clinic in Luganville on the island of Espiritu Santo, Vanuatu, was a profound and transformative experience, made possible by the generous funding from St Vincent's Pacific Health Fund. Situated on Vanuatu's largest island, Santo, the clinic plays a vital role in delivering healthcare to the local communities and supporting the nearby Northern Provincial Hospital.

From the outset, my journey was filled with unique challenges and memorable experiences. The trip began with a memorable airport adventure in Port Vila. Arriving late at night before our early flight to Santo the following morning, my friend and medical colleague, found ourselves unprepared for the less-than-ideal sleeping conditions at the airport, which we were told was supposed to be closed overnight.

Thankfully, a kind security guard allowed us to stay inside, where we spent the night on our yoga mats on the floor, grateful for the roof over our heads.

Once we arrived in Santo, we were welcomed by a warm and generous community. The Ni-Vanuatu people were incredibly patient and appreciative of the work being done at Medical Santo. The clinic is deeply respected and serves as a pillar of support in the community, which made our work there all the more rewarding. The local people's willingness to assist us with Bislama, the local pidgin language, despite our limited proficiency, highlighted their dedication and hospitality.



Picture: Accommodation was kindly provided by the Medical Santo Team, with our lovely Blue house situated behind the clinic.

Throughout the placement, we encountered various medical challenges that honed our clinical skills and cultural competence. We dealt with a significant prevalence of diabetes among the Ni-Vanuatu population, largely due to a diet high in simple carbohydrates like white rice. Additionally, common conditions included infections that could quickly escalate to cellulitis and sepsis. Asthma is another common condition we saw in the clinic, with a notable interplay between science-led Western medical

therapy and Ni-Vanuatuan cultural beliefs, as it was not uncommon for patients to refuse asthma inhalers due to beliefs linking them to black magic.

One of the most striking aspects of the placement was the remoteness of some patients. Many travelled long distances, often by boat and in the tray of a ute, to reach the clinic. Their dedication to receiving care despite such arduous journeys was a testament to the critical role Medical Santo plays in their lives.





Pictures: Some of the incredible volunteer and permanent staff of Medical Santo. The placement wasn't without its dramatic moments. A significant highlight was experiencing Cyclone Lola, a Category 5 storm. Preparing for the cyclone, gathering supplies, and securing our accommodation was an intense experience. Fortunately, the island of Santo was largely spared, though neighbouring Pentecost Island bore the brunt of the storm.

Outside of work, the island's beauty and culture provided a rich backdrop to our stay. We explored untouched beaches, pristine diving spots, and incredible blue holes. Engaging in local customs, such as kava nights and daily visits to the markets for the world's best pineapple, enriched our understanding and appreciation of the Ni-Vanuatu way of life.



Picture: Enjoying a day-off with a trip to nearby Tutuba Island. Snorkelling here we were lucky enough to encounter sea turtles and even glimpse a dugong!

In summary, my time at Medical Santo was a life-changing experience that not only developed my clinical skills but also deepened my appreciation for working in disadvantaged and remote areas. The opportunity to contribute to and learn from this vibrant community was invaluable. For anyone considering a medical placement in Vanuatu or elsewhere in the Pacific, I wholeheartedly recommend taking the leap—you won't regret it!



Picture: 1-hour ute ride to an epic day trekking through the Vanuatu Jungle to Millenium Cave, a 400m long cave deep in the jungle, discovered by Village local, Tony and his Father. Tony's family guided us on a journey down cliff-side ladders, climbing over

boulders, wading through the long, dark, water-filled cave to a a relaxing float at the end. Spectacular!